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Building Background to Improve Academic Achievement among English Language Learners

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Abstract

Over the past several years, there has been an increase in the number of English Language Learners (ELLs) within the regular classroom setting. Often times, these students know little to no English before walking into the classroom and are expected to learn the same as other students in the classroom. As students learn, they connect new information to previous information naturally. When students lack this background knowledge they have a difficult time making those connections. One way to prevent this from happening is helping build background with the students in the regular classroom setting. Throughout the study, ELLs were worked with to build their background prior to new material being taught. Student understanding and connections improved with the implementation of this building background strategy within the regular classroom. ELL test scores improved significantly as well as their confidence among their students. Helping build the background with all students is a key component for learning within any classroom.

Building Background to Improve Understanding among English Language Learning Students

“The limits of my language are the limits of my world” (Biletzki & Mater, 2002). This quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was considered to be the greatest philosopher of the 20th century, has the potential to speak to many people. Language is the key to success in every culture. Over the past few years, there has been an influx of students entering classrooms around the United States with limited or no English skills. These students are required to undergo many different obstacles dealing with language barriers. Teachers may not be trained in how to reach these students with limited English language backgrounds which can be extremely frustrating to both parties. English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers are working to get English language learners (ELLs) as fluent as possible so they can be better prepared for the classroom, but there are also things the regular classroom teacher can do to assist in the learning process.

In order for a student to be considered an ELL, individuals may not be able to communicate fluently or effectively in English and often come from non-English speaking homes or backgrounds (English Language Learner--The Hidden Curriculum, 2014). Nationwide, public schools have seen an increase of ELLs within the school setting. During the 2013-2014 school year, it was estimated 4.5 million students were considered ELLs within public schools around the United States. States have reported a 6-10 percent increase in ELLs over the past ten years (English Language Learners , 2014). These students are coming with little English skills and are expected to learn like other students in the regular classroom environment. It is important to keep in mind their culture and background during the learning process. This is a valuable component with the building background strategy which has been extremely successful for ELLs (Facella, Rampino, & Shea, 2005).

Literature Review

Researchers have been spending countless hours studying teaching strategies which will best impact the students walking into the classroom with little English skills. Many individuals working with ELLs do not even realize the amount of connections they make in their daily life based on previous learned materials. These connections to real-life examples and past experiences are key when developing ELLs understanding. Teachers should take opportunities to build connections with what students are already familiar with to the new skills or information being taught (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). Without the basic background and understanding students may struggle academically to learn new concepts. Researchers as well as educators have found the importance of building background for ELL's success within any classroom environment.

Background knowledge is an essential component for comprehension in many subject areas. The more information people know about a given subject from previous understandings, the easier it is for the individuals to retain the information (Newman, Kaefer, & Pinkham, 2014). The lack of background information may cause individuals to be unable to ask questions and process information which are key for the learning process especially with inquiry based learning which is being seen more within classrooms (Fisher, Ross, & Grant, 2010). Students coming from a limited English background typically lack this background knowledge and it is important to build this knowledge prior to teaching new materials. There are many different ways to build the background and all the strategies are valuable in the students' understanding and success within the classroom environment.

To begin the process, it is important for educators to get a basic understanding of what the student already knows. This allows them to continue to build from the already formed foundation and also check to see if the student is making connections with the topic (Edmonds, 2009). Linking the instruction to students' personal, cultural, and world experiences can positively impact the students' understanding (Haynes, 2010). As new information is introduced, the educator should determine the

best strategy to teach the new topics. Often, the best way to begin building the background is to focus on vocabulary. There are many ways to review vocabulary with students, but it is key for the students to make a connection to their life. Students may find it beneficial for them to develop a definition within their own words so it can be easily memorized. The students may also find it advantageous to have pictures or actions to demonstrate model the meaning of the word. This will help them “act” out the word and get a better understanding of how it can be used in an everyday context. As students continue to learn the vocabulary terms it is crucial the teacher continues to repeat the concepts using the proper language throughout the lesson or unit (Edmonds, 2009).

Teachers may also find it beneficial to promote more reading within the classroom to help teach vocabulary. Reading may include short articles, books, or even sections from the textbook. During this reading time, students are able to continue to build their vocabulary and really focus on reading a specific genre. This also will impact their reading comprehension within other classes and on tests as well (Facella, Rampino, & Shea, 2005). To make the learning process even more beneficial, the reading should focus in on the vocabulary terms as well as making the words connect to the students’ lives in a story situation (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). It is important to note, this reading will take ELLs longer to read and comprehend because of the language barrier. Teachers should help guide the reading process (Fisher, Ross, & Grant, 2010).

Visual aids are always extremely beneficial for ELLs as well when learning new topics and building the background. The more visual aids students can connect topics to the better they will be able to retain information (Facella, Rampino, & Shea, 2005). The visuals may help students make connections from their previous understanding to the new concepts especially when new terms or concepts are introduced. (Newman, Kaefer, & Pinkham, 2014). Many of the ways people learn are making visual connections to words. Educators often find themselves referring to words by using pictures of the imagination without even realizing. As vocabulary is introduced, it is important to help

reinforce the learning by incorporating visual aids (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). The connections to words and pictures help engrain information into long-term memory for students (Newman, Kaefer, & Pinkham, 2014).

Building background is important for students' success within the regular classroom, but the building of relationships can also be important and easily implemented within the process. The usage of pair-share activities and small group activities can help establish confidence within the ELLs to begin sharing their own ideas and answers with peers. They are also able to practice and use new vocabulary they learned (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). Allowing for collaboration within the building piece can be extremely helpful for the teacher. It is during this time educators can go around and listen to what students true understanding is and determine if any misconceptions are present and need to be cleared. Building background can be used in any classroom easily and may not only benefit ELLs, but rather all the students within the classroom. The focus was on building from their previous understanding as well as vocabulary based on the objectives for each chapter.

Method

Participants

High school ELLs between the ages of fifteen and eighteen were used in this study. The group of six students consisted of two female students and four male students all coming from the ELL background. The students had been put into the ELL classroom for one entire year at a minimum after arriving to the school district. During this period of time, students worked with the ESL teachers to learn basic English vocabulary to function within the regular classroom environment as well as culture in the United States. During this study, students continued to attend the ESL classroom at least one class period a day which consisted of 42 minutes.

Procedure

During the fourteen-week study, ELLs within the regular science classroom have been exposed to the building background process. To begin the year, they were taught as they would normally with no background knowledge development to gather baseline data. Throughout the study, the students spent the guided study hall time with the classroom teacher to help develop vocabulary, receive pre-exposure to content prior to the lesson, and review content to help build their background. Over the course of the study, students' understanding, based on both pre-assessments and post-assessments, increased substantially. Students' grades improved as well as their confidence and participation within the classroom environment.

Many of the concepts learned with the regular classroom rely on the building from previous knowledge. Students walking coming new to the classroom have a difficult time building because of their lack of knowledge. To being the building background process, the classroom teacher needs to gather as much information as possible about the individuals' background. This may include information regarding family, hobbies, and most important their previous education and topics they learned. Teachers may also provide the students a pre-assessment to help measure their understanding prior to a new unit.

In this specific study, all students were given a pre-assessment for the new unit. This helped to measure everyone's understanding and prevent focus being put on the ELLs who were a part of the study. This data helped to determine what information they already knew and how their understanding could continue to be built. Once the baseline data was collected, students were asked to come and work one-on-one with the specific teacher, as well as the ESL teachers, to help develop vocabulary and build their previous material. Students would spend, on average, two days a week working with the teacher on the specific topic in the classroom environment. During this period of time, students were

exposed to content that would be covered in future lessons to help them understand the specific vocabulary and concepts. This work completed upfront of lessons what seemed to have the most impact on the individuals. When the topics were eventually taught, the students were better prepared to participate in class and willing to participate. The confidence within the individual increased overall as well as their scores. As the data tables show below (Table 1 and Table 2), students score extremely low in the pre-assessment data. When comparing ELLs scores with other student scores, ELLs would score at significantly lower than the regular student on average in the pre-assessment. Over the course of the study and other data collections, ELLs appeared to have the most growth in their understanding based on the scores. ELLs scored, on average, two full letter grades higher than their initial score while mainstreamed students scored, on average, one full letter grade higher.

Results

In regards to quantitative data collected, ELLs appeared to be better prepared to participate in classroom discussion after the building background concept was implemented. They were able to share ideas and answers to the rest of the class and also define specific vocabulary terms. Students' appeared much more relaxed and confident within the regular classroom environment and would ask questions more when they did not understand. The building background learning significantly helped the ELLs within the regular classroom.

Student ID Number	Pre-Assessment Scores	Average of Post-Assessments and Quizzes
191074	10%	86%
181073	2%	71%
190076	13%	82%
191078	36%	78%
190069	56%	88%
171069	22%	73%

Table 1: Individual data from pre-assessments and post-assessment scores over unit 1 (Biochemistry) from individual ELLs. Scores were based on the percentage of questions answered correctly on each assessment.

Student ID Number	Pre-Assessment Scores	Average of Post-Assessments and Quizzes
191074	30%	88%
181073	0%	82%
190076	22%	91%
191078	46%	95%
190069	66%	95%
171069	12%	78%

Table 2: Individual data from pre-assessments and post-assessment scores over unit 2 (cellular organelles) from individual ELLs. Scores were based on the percentage of questions answered correctly on each assessment.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

Language is a vital piece within the learning process. This study indicated how building the background among students can positively impact their learning within the regular classroom with a focus on ELL. The fourteen-week study worked with six ELLs to build their background which is a teaching strategy that may be used within any classroom. Students worked with both the regular classroom teacher and ESL teachers throughout the study. The building background strategy assisted students in understanding vocabulary pertaining to the units and objectives all while connecting the

content to each students' previous knowledge and filling in the gaps when necessary. All individuals make connections to new material to what they have experienced in the past. Some individuals, such as ELLs, come from different backgrounds and cultures so they have a difficult time making those connections.

Two different units taught to the students were used in this study as well as a baseline which was used for comparison. The results, shown in Table 1 and Table 2, of this experiment show that the data collected from the assessments indicate the implementation of building background significantly improved student understanding. Each student in the study improved their post-assessment score by at least 30% percent from the pre-assessment scores with the range of gain being between 30% and 80%. These assessments were given prior to the unit as well as after the students were taught the unit. The same assessments were given to the students to measure growth to prevent any biases. Students were exposed too much more of the vocabulary over the given period of time and were given the opportunity to develop a better understanding over the given topic.

Integration of Findings with Literature

Numerous hours have been spent by educational research to develop a better understanding on how to reach ELLs. As more students are entering the school systems with less understanding of the given vocabulary, it is vital for teachers to reach them by first building from their background. Over the course of this given study, students worked with both ESL teachers and the regular classroom teacher to develop basic background knowledge prior to lessons in the regular classroom. Teachers focused on exposing students to new vocabulary terms before the regular class period and helped them connect new concepts to their previous knowledge.

Throughout the study, students' confidence continued to improve within the regular classroom environment and became more willing to participate within the daily discussions which they were

prepared for prior to class. ESL teachers helped expose students to new material while allowed them to be more comfortable sharing their thoughts and would even share experiences which connected to new material. Every student within the classroom connects material to their background. When the basic background is not present, it is extremely difficult for students to learn the material. In the regular classroom environment, everything builds from previous knowledge and concepts. When students don't have this foundation, they begin to struggle which is often seen in the classroom. In the study, as students' knowledge was built the struggles were not seen as much in the classroom. Student's test scores improved as well as their long term understanding.

Personal Outcomes

The study focused on improving understanding by building background for ELLs within the science classroom. The science classroom provides the opportunity for students to learn using more hands on activities within the lab situations compared to other classrooms. Students were able to apply their classroom knowledge to real life situations. Vocabulary and reading comprehension was used during the study to build student understanding, but they were taught to read within scientific material. A lot of what the students did could be implemented within any classroom environment, but may need to be changed to fit the given classroom and content. The building background strategy does not limit itself to one given classroom, but rather provides opportunity for students to learn and deepen their understanding within any classroom when implemented correctly.

Building background knowledge may be a tedious process, but the outcome when implemented is extremely beneficial for student success within the classroom environment. Teachers who are working with ELLs will see a significant improvement in how students interact with their peers and their overall understanding when implementing the building background teaching strategy. This strategy is able to be used within any classroom and benefits all learners. Teachers are given the opportunity to

gage student understanding and design meaningful lessons for students after gathering some pre-assessment data. Student understanding is able to continue to be developed deeper and overlapping of material can be minimized.

During the study, ELLs were able to have more positive interactions with their peers during the regular class time. Teachers saw their confidence improve within the classroom as well as their understanding. The information learned, was retained much longer after implementing the strategy and allowed students to connect material to more real-life situations. Building background provided the opportunity to make learning more authentic to students. The students were able to gain a better understanding of how it can be used in their daily life and explain to people the reason why they were learning the content.

Conclusion

Language is key to understanding culture and everyday life. With the increasing number of individuals coming into our school systems knowing little to no English, teachers are having to change the way they teach. Since 2013, there have been nearly 23% more ELLs within the regular classroom (English Language Learner--The Hidden Curriculum, 2014). The traditional ways of teaching no longer work for many of the students sitting within the chairs of the classroom. Students have a difficult time learning the basic vocabulary terms which are vital when learning new material as well as connecting new material to previous material. One-way teacher can help to improve student understanding and reduce confusion is the implementation of building background.

Building background is a teaching strategy which helps individuals continue to build from what they already know or have been exposed to in real-life situations (Newman, Kaefer, & Pinkham, 2014). There are many different ways to help build background, but the study focused on the building of vocabulary and exposing ELLs to material prior to it being taught in the classroom. Students worked one

on one with the classroom teacher as well as the ESL teacher to review objectives from previous lessons as well as get pre-exposure before class. Throughout the study, students understanding as well as their recall significantly improved based on their pre-assessments.

Overall, the building background strategy helped to improve the understanding of ELLs by more than two full letter grades in most cases. The qualitative data was remarkable as well. Students appeared much more confident when discussing the content in small groups, were able to participate in whole class discussion, and improved significantly in their vocabulary. Allowing students to get pre-exposure to content and build the information from their previous understanding was extremely valuable. The students seemed to have a sense of achievement when working with them one on one.

A lot of what we remember and learn is based on previous material. When students don't have the basic information to build from they struggle to make the necessary connections. The building background strategy helped to bridge that gap and provide the students with the opportunity to make the necessary connections. The students walking into classrooms today are not like they used to be. Students are coming from different backgrounds and cultures that need to be embraced through the learning process. As the students' dynamics change, the teachers much change as well when it comes to instruction. One of the most beneficial ways to help these students is to help them learn from their past. Building background can positively impact the learning for ELLs within any classroom setting when implemented correctly.

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